

Lady Macbeth

None of Shakespeare's characters have attracted more attention, or been the cause of more fierce disputes, among dramatic critics, than that of Lady Macbeth.

It is one of the most inscrutable ~~works~~ creations of the great tragedian. There have been two widely different opinions afloat in the literary world with regard to it. One or the other of these opinions has been adopted, with some slight modifications, by every critic whose works we have seen.

One of these parties, consider the character of Lady Macbeth, as entirely incongruous and alien to the author's works. They claim, that its atrocious depravity is un-feminine, unnatural, inhuman;—that the motive and the act are disproportionate;—that so ^{and deliberate} great wickedness is unreconcilable, with the womanly nature and extreme sensibility of mind, manifested by the Lady Macbeth;—after the commission of the crime, ~~unless~~, the incentive were of a much more powerful and exciting nature, than that presented to the wife of Cawdor.

The other party, while admitting the feebleness of the ^{time} motive, still contend for the truthfulness of the character, on the ground, that Lady Macbeth was one of those anomalies of wickedness, which seem created, merely to show how nearly man may be allied to devils, ^{and yet} ~~without~~ retain the form of his creator. They claim that she was one, whose innate depravity was such, or whose conscience was so deadened and benumbed, that she had no need of those powerful incentives, which are requisite

to draw others into such depths of vice. Such an one in short as Theresia Burgin is generally supposed to have been.

Neither of these theories, seem to us entirely correct.

The former is a direct impeachment of the genius of Shakespeare, which we should, if possible, avoid.

The latter is, from the same reason, equally objectionable; for, if Lady Macbeth, was one of those degraded anomalies, which startle the world with their wickedness, who commit the most horrible of crimes with little or no motive save their love of evil, it was a character entirely unfitted for dramatic Poetry. Such a character if drawn to the life would shock and disgust by its hideousness. Instead of being a favorite on the stage, and possessing that wild beauty, which it now has, it would be loathed by the masses, even of the most depraved. Even though decked with all the false flattery of misguiding genius, it would still be unfit for dramatic representation.

Lady Macbeth appears to us, as a woman of extreme sensibility, and even delicacy of mind, misled to a deed of almost fiendish atrocity, by a fervent overpowering love for her husband, and by a superstitious fatalism which had become deeply rooted in her soul. We cannot conceive of her as the virago, who had only to change her bodily form to become ^{a man} and that one of the vilest. That passage which is oftentimes quoted to prove her masculinity of soul, is, to us, pregnant with a different meaning. It is the exclamation of a woman whose deep slave would lead her to do dark deeds, ^{to promote} ~~for~~ her husband.

glory, but her woman's nature shakes her
shoulder at the thought of crime, and she exclaims

"Come, come, you spirits,
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here
And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top full a
Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood,
Stop up the access, and passage to remorse;
+ + + + "Come to my woman's breasts
And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,
"Where'er in your sightless substances
"You wait on Nature's mischief." Act I, Scene V.

This is the cry of a woman, who feels the weakness of her
nature, and trembles at the deed she meditates. It is her
heart, far more than her bodily strength, on which she can
not rely, and she desires far more the cold, hard heart,
of depraved manhood than its strong arm.

But what was the motive which prompted this prayer?
First, her love for Macbeth; Secondly, the belief that
she was fated to accomplish her husband's elevation, by means
of crime.

Lady Macbeth is one of the noblest illustrations of
the subtlety of Coleridge's ^{distinction} between the love of man and that
of woman. "Man's desire is for the woman - woman's for the
desire and happiness of the man." Her love was of that
deep, passionate kind, which makes her forgetful of
self. Never, once, does she refer to her own glory, even as
an accompaniment of her husband's elevation. Her whole
soul seems wrapped up in her husband's success, and
proudly she exclaims, "Great-glumis! worthy Caudor!
"Greater than both by the all-hail hereafter!"

We cannot say her love was pure but it was as
deep strong and self-debasing as woman's nature ever
knew. Many passages might be cited in proof of this, had
we space to insert them.

The influence of the Witches, on the mind of Macbeth has been noticed by many, who seem to have left out of consideration the effect which their prophecies had upon his wife. If, however, we closely scan the character of Lady Macbeth, we shall find that she was borne onward in her purposes by the constant idea of an overruling destiny, an unrelenting unavoidable Fate. She greets her husband by the "all-hail hereafter," and says

"Thy letters have transported me beyond
This ignorant present, and I feel now
The future in the instant." Her husband's letter seems to have fired her with the idea that he was fated to be king, and she to make him such by the most atrocious of crimes. This leads her to wish herself unsexed, to reprove her husband's weakness, to urge him to crime, to endure so long the torments of an outraged conscience.

Without this the character of Lady Macbeth is true entirely absurd, and unnatural; with it it is one of the noblest creations of genius.

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